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# **Study Skills Seminar Student Packet**

## **Module #3 — Communication**

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## COMMUNICATION

Good learning skills, like reading, note taking, test taking, etc., are important, but to do well in school, you also need to “communicate” so that you can persuade your teacher that you really do deserve that “A”.

Every day whether you like it or not, you are communicating—to your parents, teachers, friends, and classmates. If you have a better understanding of how you, and those around you, perceive our world, you will improve your understanding of what others are saying to you, and be better able to communicate your thoughts so that others will understand you.

### **Understanding Perception**

For communication to take place, it must somehow stimulate one or more of our senses. It will therefore help to understand a little about just how we make sense out of our sensations.

At any point in time, we are literally flooded with input from our senses and there is absolutely no way we can process every little bit of information. We do not, however, perceive our world as a random collection of sensations. Rather, we recognize the world as coherent patterns and specific objects.

The basic reason for this lies in the fact that perception is an active process where we impose our own order on that world we perceive.

By understanding the natural ways we tend towards selection and organization, and by understanding how this works in others, we will be able to better communicate our thoughts, feelings and desires.

### **Organization**

Though our world may be chaotic, our perception is structured. We tend to organize information brought by our senses into meaningful patterns and these organizations generally follow several basic principals.

### **Perceptual Grouping**

We tend to group stimuli together based on three basic relationships.

**Proximity** is the grouping we use when stimuli are near each other.

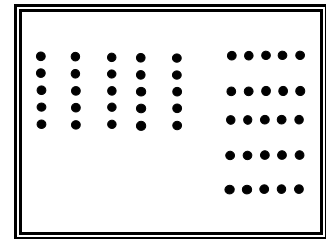
If we see things

near each other, we will assume that they are

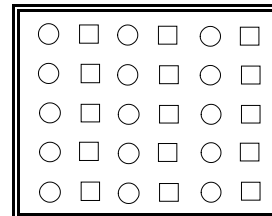
a s s o c i a t e d .

**Similarity** is the grouping method we use for things that appear alike. When we see people dressed alike, we naturally assume that they also act alike talk alike, and think

alike. And **Closure** is the tendency to fill in the gaps. We do not observe every detail of an entire picture and we have to fill in the blanks and make decisions based on incomplete information. This is not often desirable and it is rarely fair but it is the best



Proximity - We tend to group things that are near to each other.



Similarity - We tend to see vertical lines of similar objects.



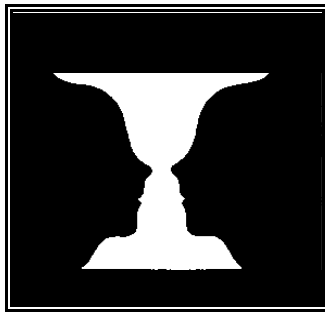
Closure - We have the ability to perceive a complete picture with incomplete information.

solution available.

Note that the principals described do not apply solely to simple visual tricks but as you have seen, can and do apply to social groups.

### Figure Ground:

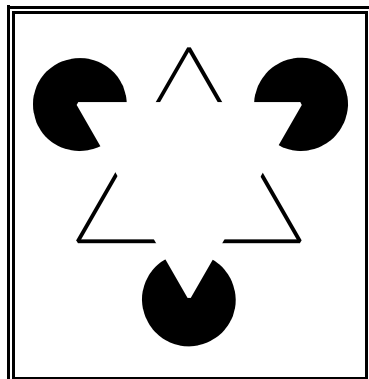
By generalizing these rules of proximity, similarity, and closure, we can begin to understand how we process information and make sense out of it. We tend to perceive our world as consisting of objects (figure) within a scene (ground). The figures are the things we decide are important and the ground fades away into unimportant details. This can be demonstrated in ambiguous figures and reversible drawings.



Reversible Image

### Illusions:

We do not perceive our world directly. What happens visually is that a set of cells in our eyes respond to various lines, motions and qualities of light in our environment. Each of these cells then sends a signal to the brain

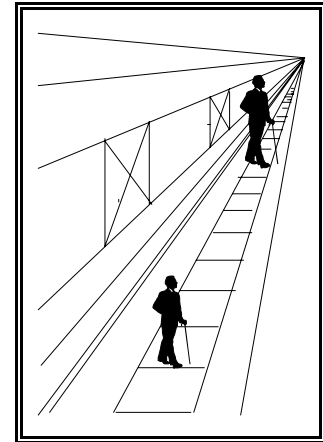


Subjective Contour - How many triangles are in this drawing?

where they are combined to form a representation of the world around us. This is what allows optical illusions to occur. We are simply applying rules that usually work in the real world.

### Ponzo Illusion

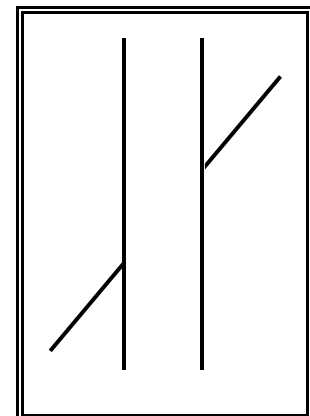
Converging lines usually imply greater distance and we usually perceive an object like a person or a car as maintaining the same size regardless of how near or distant it may be.



Ponzo Illusion - Which man is larger?

### Poggendorf Illusion

Under certain cloud conditions the Poggendorf illusion creates the illusion that an airplane is either higher (or lower) than its actual altitude and has been the cause of several mid-air collisions.



Poggendorf Illusion - Is the diagonal line straight?

**Adaptation Level** is another source of error in perception. Imagine you take a bite from an orange; first after licking a lemon, then after a piece of chocolate. The

difference in perception is due to adaptation. Adaptation level can also be seen in the classroom. When you compare yourself with someone who is not doing well in the class you may think yourself as doing quite well. But when you compare yourself to the class superstar you may feel that you are not doing well at all.

### Attention

Attention is selective. When you are at a party, you make use of the natural selective nature of perception. You can easily screen out all of the voices around you except the one you are talking to. Moreover, you can easily shift your attention from one person to another at will.

### Internal Factors

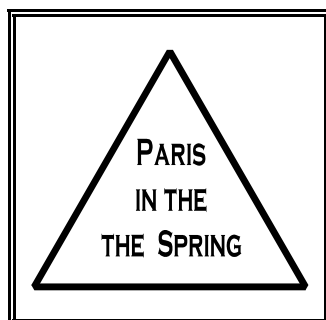
#### Motivation

Here again your personal motivation plays an important factor. If it is near lunch time and you are hungry, you may be tempted to attend to the smell of the cafeteria rather than the words of the instructor. If on the other hand, you are concerned about making a good grade you will be more likely to ignore your stomach and pay attention to the classroom topic.

#### Past Experience

The things we attend to are also affected by our past experiences.

A common experience is to learn a new word and then hear the



Past experience may cause you to see what you expect to see rather than what is there.

word several times in the next few days where you have never heard the word in conversation before. The word was always being used but your attention was effectively screening it out. It is past experience that allows us to efficiently attend to the things that contain information and ignore the things that do not.

### External Factors

Although motivation plays an important part in determining what is noticed, there are also factors within the stimulus itself that go into selecting what is noticed. Among the most important are vividness and salience.

**Salience** - is the effect where something stands out from the other things around it. If you see someone in a tuxedo at a football game he is more salient than if you see the same person at an opera.

**Vividness** - on the other hand refers to the emotional component of a stimulus. The message, "Smoking causes cancer." on a pack of cigarettes has low vividness, but a picture from surgery showing a cancerous lung has high vividness.

### Social Perception

Just as errors are made in perceiving the world around us, we also make errors when we perceive and evaluate the actions of those around us.

There are no absolute answers or tricks on how to read and understand people and the few answers we do have are complex because human beings are complex.

The two aspects of understanding we will explore here are attribution and impression formation.

**Attribution** is the process of understanding why people do what they do.

**Impression Formation** is the way we combine varied (often conflicting) information we observe about a person into a single impression or belief about that person.

### Attribution

To try to "understand" or "know" other people, we try to find ways to predict the action others. We attend to several sources to gather this information. We pay attention to age, style of dress and hair, attractiveness, etc. We also observe overt actions and infer traits, motivations and goals. This is complicated by two factors. People may try to mislead us intentionally and often actions stem from external factors rather than internal motivations.

In determining the "why" of others' actions, we tend to focus on three factors; consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness. **Consensus** expresses to what extent other people behave in the same manner under these circumstances. **Consistency** refers to the extent to which a person behaves in the same manner on other like occasions. **Distinctiveness** - does this person act differently in different situations.

With these factors as a guide we build a mental picture of a person and establish what we believe that person is like. In other words, what causes a person to be a particular way. This is referred to as **Causal Attribution** and can be broken down into levels of effort, ability, luck, and task difficulty.

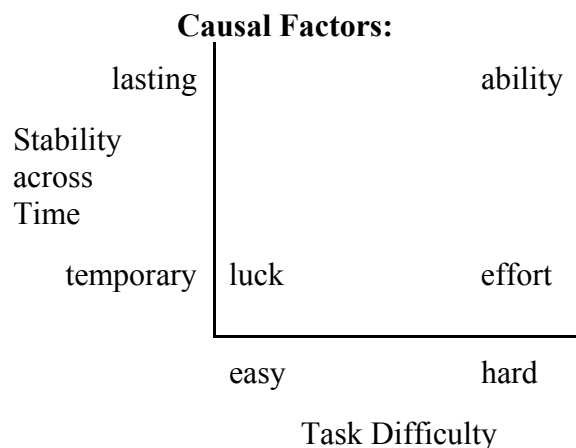
First we tend to hold others responsible for internal motivations, but we tend not to hold others responsible for external motivations. Let's consider John's case. John is disruptive in English class today. He is not disruptive on other days (consistency is low). He does not disrupt in other classes

(distinctiveness is high). Other people are disruptive in English class (consensus is high).

Therefore, the teacher will probably attribute John's actions to external causes.

Second, conclusions about the causes of others' behavior can strongly affect how we evaluate their performance.

Consider two basketball players being considered for team captain. Both players have the same performance record. One is very talented but does not work very hard. One is of modest ability but works very hard. Most people tend to put more value on effort than ability and would choose the hard worker over the talented player.



### Forming First Impressions:

The common belief that first impressions are important is very true. Let's examine just how they are formed and what factors affect their formation. When we first meet a person, we are literally flooded with new information. We notice the style of dress, the appearance, manner of speech, age, ethnic background, sex, etc. From your own experience, you know that you don't just catalogue all of these bits of data, but rather you combine them into a unified picture, or overall impression, that

ranges from favorable to unfavorable. In a computer, this would take extremely complex mathematical processing. To do this massive feat of mathematical gymnastics, evidence points to the fact that we use a process called weighted averaging to combine the available bits of information into a coherent whole, but where some facts are more important to us than others.

### **Impression Formation:**

We tend to attach the greatest weight into five distinct types.

First, we attach more weight to lasting traits than to temporary ones. So traits that would be classified as ability are given more value than those involving luck or one time effort.

Second, when receiving information "second hand" we assign more weight when we receive it from someone we perceive as being reputable.

Third, information we receive first has more weight than something we receive later (primacy effect). This is why it is so difficult to change a person's beliefs once they have been formed.

Fourth, we assign more weight to negative traits than to positive ones.

Fifth - we assign more weight to extreme behaviors, either positive or negative, than to moderate behaviors.

### **How Social Perceptions Fail**

We have seen examples of how our perceptions can be tricked and we believe that we see something that is not really there. This is also observable in social perception as well.

### **Fundamental Attribution Error**

Suppose you are standing in a checkout

lane and see the clerk shout angrily at a customer and tell him to take his business elsewhere. How would you account for this behavior? Research suggests that you do in fact draw specific conclusions. Chances are you would conclude that the clerk is a hostile person best to be avoided.

This most common form of bias is called the **fundamental attribution error** which is the tendency to view others' actions as being internal in origin rather than external. We tend to assume that people behave the way they do because they are "that kind of person." The external causes tend to be down-played or ignored. And because of fundamental attribution error we expect others to behave more consistently than is warranted.

### **Actor-Observer Effect**

Another closely related effect can be easily illustrated. If you see someone walking down a street and then trip. You may say that person is either clumsy or careless. But suppose on another day the same thing happened to you. You would probably attribute the trip to some external causes; broken pavement, slippery shoes, etc.

This error in social perception can have serious consequences. We may overlook important inconsistencies in our own behavior or feelings.

Consider a student who gets into repeated arguments with teachers and other students. Because of actor-observer effect, he may perceive that these incidents are caused by bad luck, or built-in hostility on the part of teachers and down-play or ignore his own stubbornness or abrasiveness.

### **Self-Serving Bias**

People tend to take credit for good

outcomes while denying responsibility for negative ones. If you do well on a test you probably assume that it was a result of hard work, high intelligence and innate talent.

If on the other hand, you do poorly on a test you probably attribute the poor performance on external factors like the teachers' unreasonably high standards, lack of instruction, etc. In short, you take credit for success and deny responsibility for failure.

Looking back to Maslow, there is a very good reason for us to do this. It protects or enhances our self esteem and presents a positive public image to appear favorable in the eyes of others.

It can also get us into an awful lot of trouble. If we are working together in groups, we will tend to take most of the credit for the group's effort and tend to blame the others for the group's failures which can cause a lot of friction among the members of the group.

### **Stereotypes**

This refers to the belief - almost always false - that all members of a group possess certain traits or show one kind of behavior. In most cases stereotypes carry a negative slant and are anything but flattering.

### **Halo Effects**

This type of error refers to the fact that once we form an overall impression of a person, this global impression tends to strongly affect our judgements about specific traits.

Once a person has gained such a halo, either good or bad, everything they do will be judged (or slanted) in the same light.

### **Applying Perception to Communication**

The preceding material addresses several

ways that we perceive our world, how we organize our perceptions and how we attend to and ignore information stimuli. Next we will look at some tips and techniques to use this knowledge to be better communicators.

### **Listening**

As students, most of our communication activities involve receiving information. The more effective we are at listening (and remembering what we have heard), less time will be required in working at learning.

Mark Wilkinson identifies seven steps that will help streamline the listening exercise. They are: 1.) Get ready to listen; 2.) Take responsibility for comprehension; 3.) Listen for understanding; 4.) Control your emotions; 5.) Listen for the main ideas; 6.) Be mentally agile; and 7.) Take notes. Let's take a look at each of these ideas in more detail.

#### **Get ready to listen**

Getting ready to listen begins with applying what we know from Maslow's hierarchy. It is difficult to learn when you are hungry, tired, thirsty, cold, or when some other physical needs are not met. As much as possible, make sure you take care of your physical needs and that you are physically ready to listen.

It is usually impossible to control for all possible distractions, but we can apply our knowledge of attention to decide what is important and what we can ignore as part of the background. Make the mental decision to ignore whatever distracts you from what you are listening to.

Review what you already know about the subject and try to imagine what the speaker will say. This way you will "tune in" to the subject and be able to identify the main ideas

as they come up. Remember, however, that sometimes past experience can cause us to miss that is actually there.

### **Take responsibility for comprehension**

Learning is an activity that happens because of what the learner does, not because of what the teacher does. Many students (and even a few teachers) view the learner as an empty vessel and knowledge as a fluid that can be poured in. Learning does not happen that way. Take charge of your own learning. You are the looser when learning does not happen and there are no points given for “It’s not my fault.”

### **Listen for understanding**

When you listen to a speaker, it is important to listen with a critical ear. There are plenty of people who make questionable statements of “fact” and offer little to support their position. It is important, however, to listen to all that the speaker has to say before you begin contradicting. That creates an adversarial atmosphere that interferes with learning in all people involved. Rather than asking yourself what is wrong with what the speaker is saying, ask yourself how could it be right.

### **Active Listening Lead-Ins**

Even if you believe that what the speaker says is wrong, here are some ways to check your understanding and clarify what the other person is feeling or thinking.

Could it be that .....  
I wonder if .....  
I'm not sure if I'm .....  
Would you buy this idea .....  
Correct me if I'm wrong, but .....

Is it possible if .....  
Does it sound reasonable that you .....  
Could this be what's going on, .....  
From where I stand .....  
This is what I think I hear you saying ...  
You appear to be feeling .....  
It appears that you .....  
Perhaps you're feeling .....  
I sense that maybe you feel/think .....  
Is there any chance that .....  
Maybe you feel that .....  
Let me see if I understand; you .....  
Let me see if I'm with you .....

If you feel certain you understand the emotion or thought:

So then you feel .....  
From your point of view .....  
It seems to you .....  
From where you stand .....  
As you see it .....  
You think .....  
You believe .....  
What I hear you saying .....  
You're ...(sad, angry, disappointed, etc.)  
I'm picking up that .....  
I really hear you saying that .....  
Where you're coming from .....  
So, what you mean is.....

### **Control your emotions**

There are many distractions that interfere with our ability to listen. Be able to separate the message from the messenger. Just because the speaker may be fat, old, bald, thin, have bad teeth, or whatever, remember that these things are background and should be ignored. Value the message for its own self regardless of how it might be delivered.

### **Listen for the main ideas**

Remember that main ideas are statements



that are supported by facts, opinions and other related details. When you are listening, look for the main ideas. These are the important things to remember.

### **Be mentally agile**

People can think much faster than it is possible to speak so there is plenty of opportunity to drift off and lose focus of the speaker's topic. Instead, make use of the extra time to review what the speaker has previously said and predict what will be said next. This will help you check yourself that you really understand what is being presented.

### **Take notes**

The main purpose of notes is to help the student recall and reconstruct the main ideas of a presentation at a later date. Notes should be taken of the main ideas and enough supporting statements to clarify them. They should not interfere with our understanding of what the speaker is saying. Verbatim notes should only be taken to insure clarity, as in taking down the definitions of new terms and concepts.

### **Speaking**

One of the most frightening assignments for students is the oral presentation. Stage fright and other aspects that manifest this fear of speaking are very common, lifelong, and never completely goes away. Luckily, there are things you can do to reduce the fear and actually enjoy the experience.

### **Be Fully Prepared**

It seems like a simplistic solution, but proper preparation can eliminate most of the causes of a poor oral presentation.

### Prepare Your Subject

If you have adequately prepared your subject, you have done the vast majority of the work necessary to give a good spoken presentation.

- Precisely define your topic
- Conduct adequate research.
- Support your ideas.
- Get organized.

### Prepare Your Presentation

- Analyze your subject and your audience.
- Formalize your main ideas.
- Identify what your audience should know or do after your presentation.
- Use language that is alive.
- Practice.

### Prepare Yourself

- Focus your attention on your audience and subject, rather than yourself.
- Relax. Take several long, deep breaths before you begin your talk.
- Take your time. Don't rush in.
- Establish appropriate eye contact with your audience.

### **Non-Verbal Communication**

Just as it is the listener's responsibility to pay attention and evaluate the worth of what is being said, it is the speaker's responsibility to command attention and persuade the audience of the validity of the talk. The truest, most important message will probably be lost if it is delivered by a weak and insecure speaker. For this reason it is important to pay attention not only to the words you say, but to the non-verbal ways you say them.

### Appearance

Whether rightly or wrongly, appearances do make a difference in whether the message a person gives is believed or taken seriously. Make sure you are properly groomed and dressed appropriately for the situation, subject topic and audience.

### Eye Contact

Establish the amount of eye contact that is appropriate for your audience and that is expected from someone in your position. If you do this right, you will communicate to your audience that you are confident about your self and the subject. If not, you risk being perceived as either evasive, insincere or rude.

### Movement and Gestures

Move around when you speak. People are naturally attracted to motion so as long as it does not distract from the subject. This can indeed help you maintain the attention of your audience. Also, movement helps you to stay alert and mentally agile.

Gestures are a natural part of communication. They can sometimes be used to express a sense of time, emotional state, place and other things more quickly and accurately than words. Practice using gestures and making them meaningful in your talks.

### Voice

The voice and the way you use it can add greatly to the communication. It can convey a feeling of warmth and openness or it can convey hostility, irritation and defensiveness. Be aware of how your voice sounds to others and pay attention to these specific qualities of speaking.

### Rate

People normally speak around 150 words per minute and find that a comfortable listening rate. As you get nervous, your rate often gets faster and you tend to make verbal mistakes which makes you more nervous. Watch yourself and force yourself to slow down when you get nervous.

Also vary your speaking rate. Speaking at the same rate all the time gets boring and you will lose your audience.

### Pitch

In English, we use pitch to convey punctuation and to express emotional content. A rise in pitch at the end of a sentence indicates a question mark and emphasis on a particular word in a sentence is like seeing that word in bold face type. Often, it is not easy to recognize the specific emotion being expressed so care must be taken when including pitch to express emotion in a spoken presentation. In general, a rise in pitch indicates higher emotional energy which could be excitement, anger, frustration or something else.

## **Writing**

Spoken communication and written communication have essentially the same objectives, to inform or persuade, but where spoken communication tends to be casual and transient, written communication tends to be more formal, precise and permanent.

When you speak a sentence out loud, the communication is put out into the air, and is gone. You can't get it back. Once placed on paper, however, written communication is there for all to see as long as the paper exists. This is the greatest strength and one of the reasons why precision is important.

Perhaps an even greater need for precision in writing is that writing can only carry the words of the language. Aspects like smiles, eye contact, a wink, pitch, and gestures can not be easily included without adding a lot of extra words.

### Writing Reflects the Times

The way people write, and what is acceptable in writing, has changed over the years. Many people alive today were taught that the written form should be strict, formal and impersonal. The trend now is to write as if you were speaking to your reader and to use shorter, more compact language. A previously preferred sentence of: “It has come to the attention of this Commander that certain cadets are deserving of substantial praise for their recent accomplishments.” would now be replaced by: “I just found out about the accomplishments of our cadets. Good job!”

Also not long ago, students were taught to never end a sentence with a preposition. Now, this is seen to add unnecessary words and complexity to your paper. So, “Included is the documentation you asked for.” is now preferred to, “Included is the documentation for which you asked.”

Keep in mind however, that for students, the “correct way” is the way the teacher does it, so find out before you write your paper.

### Reader Centered Writing

The reason for writing a letter, report or paper of any kind is to have it read by someone else. Keep the reader in mind when you write.

Many books on writing begin this topic with something like “Identify your subject”, “Think about what you want to talk about.” or

some other subject centered statement. There is nothing wrong with this approach but if you truly want to maintain a reader centered paper, another way to ask the question would be: “What do you want your reader to know (or be able to do)?” This will help you narrow your focus and identify your topic.

### Begin on Common Ground

It is frustrating to come into the middle of a story or conversation and try to figure out what is going on. Don’t just start talking about your main points without giving your reader a frame of reference. It might be disorienting for a reader if you began writing about the relations between isobars and static saturation without letting them know that you are dealing with weather. Begin your paper with a broad category that you can narrow down to your subject.

### Statements and Related Details

Just as you have learned to read by identifying the main statements, use the same structure in writing for others to read. Make your statements and then support those statements with related details.

Keep track of the main points you want to address. Make sure that all of your related details actually do relate to and support your points. Leave out that “really neat” stuff that doesn’t relate to the points.